

Luke 14:25-33

The Potter

Jeremiah 18:1-11

September 8, 2019

I have long believed that biblical faith, that is, the gospel, addresses us *at the level of our humanity*. That is to say, it does not speak to us as men and women, or as American, or even as Christians, or any other distinction that resides too close to the surface of our lives (and that includes race, class, ethnicity, orientation, or any of the others). In the two texts that have been read in our presence this morning, this idea is presented, in quite different ways.

The Potter

In the Jeremiah text the prophet is challenged by the illustration of a potter, working clay. In the experience of watching the potter he sees that whenever there is a lack of satisfaction with the shaping of the clay, the potter is able to change it, even to the extent of starting over.

In the almost contemporary hymn, “Have Thine Own Way,” the image is also applied to the experience of a believer, submitting to the authority of God’s guidance and care:

“Have thine own way, Lord  
Have thine own way  
Thou are the potter, and I am the clay  
Mold me and make me, after thy will  
While I am waiting, yielded and still”

One can see that as a part of Christian discipleship, the faithful are encouraged to make themselves shape-able in order to become better than what they had previously been. But in Jeremiah, the visual aid is *harder* than that. It is applied to Israel as a nation, more specifically, Judah, and the implication is that the nation has not become what God desired it to be, and was in for a hard re-shaping.

As a matter-of-fact, the prophet’s message is just that, Judah has failed, and is ripe for a disaster;

“Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘this is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, reform your ways and your actions.’”

What makes the warning interesting is that it is *not* directed against the enemies of Judah, but against Judah itself. It reflects the notion that Jeremiah, one of Judah’s own prophets, was engaged in self-reflection, not primarily concerned with the sinfulness of the Babylonians or any other outsider, but with his own sinfulness and that of his own people.

It turns out that Judah, like Israel before it, was made up of human beings who have more or less the same problems as other people have, who may be their enemies. The bible speaks to us *at this level*, that is what I meant when I say, “the level of our humanity.

## Luke

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus also speaks to those who understand themselves to be the descendants of the Judeans and though he comes along about 600 years after the prophet Jeremiah and the Babylonian crisis. They also knew what it was like to be conquered (in their case, the Romans).

Jesus is being followed by large crowds because he is offering them hope. But then after the fashion of the prophets like Jeremiah, he turns on them with the same kind of message. Although he does not use the illustration of a potter, he does challenge them to self reflection:

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

He then goes on to explain how people who want to achieve things; the building of a tower or the fighting of a war, will first sit down and consider the cost before making the decision about what to do. And when it comes to following Jesus, the cost is high;

“In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has, cannot be my disciple.”

Last week I mentioned that in the Gospel of Luke Jesus is presented as preaching people away from

discipleship. This is the text that I was thinking about when I said it. Certainly it stands in contrast to all the efforts of the modern church to pack them in, to make the life of faith attractive; whether it be with rock-and-roll music and casual dress or children’s programs or with stained glass and pipe organs.

I think of myself, as a minister, standing here in a business suit, a coat and tie, appearing professional and educated, so that by my presentation I might make the gospel attractive. My friends at the rock-and-roll churches are in blue jeans and t-shirts, some of them with tattoos (even though the bible prohibits it) or “country-club casual,” they are doing the same thing; trying to make the gospel attractive by making it casual and cool.

As for all the robed up main-liners and Catholics, that look is designed to cover up the humanity of the clergy and make them look saintly (even though they know there are not). It is pointless. Jesus may have seemed cool or professional or saintly to his audience, but his message was demanding, that people left him.

It was demanding because it was able to penetrate the surface-level appearances of their lives and get down to the depths of what it meant, we say, what it means, to be a human being; in community with one another, and in relation to God.

## Prejudices

Whenever we see what we think is pure evil, like ISIS beheading people, or the perpetrators of mass violence or industrial or political corruption, we are tempted to diminish it by associating it with some distinction which is supposed to have caused it: it is a problem with Islam, or capitalism, or socialism, or Christianity, or some ideology.

But no matter the harm being done, or by whom, or for whatever reason they claim, the gospel confronts us with the reality that they, in the end, are simply acting like human beings sometimes act; with greed, resentment, fear, hate, pride, arrogance, and jealousy, and all that. The problem is at the level of our humanity.

And so is the solution. And the solution involves a kind of renunciation, a willingness to be shaped and molded by what we accept as greater than we are. In that sense it involves a denial of the self and its desires and passions, the belief that it can solve its own dilemma, the dilemma of our own humanity.

Thus it produces a kind of hatred of one's own life. I can't help but reach the conclusion that what Jesus is really talking about is not the requirements of discipleship, but what it takes to be a human being.

## Good News

The gospel, however, would not be good news if it ended there. The good news is that the sacrifice we have been asked to make has already been made for us, by the very one who is doing the asking. It turns out the potter has an investment in the clay, loves it, and desires it to be shaped and molded for its good.

Just last night on CNN there was a special about the 50th anniversary of Woodstock. If you are too young to know what that is, ask your grandparents. The boomers thought they were going to change the world with peace and love. They didn't. The question was asked, "is there no way to fix human nature?" As Jesus once said, "it is impossible for people, but not for God." By grace, sometimes human beings act the other way.

Once it is realized that the potter loves the clay, the whole process of denial and submission is turned into a joy that produces the same characteristics that we see in God's revealed nature; compassion, humility forgiveness, courage, perseverance, most of all unselfish love . . . to the praise and glory of God.

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